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First-class exploring



Laid-back life in the far north... on board the Orion, a glimpse of paradise.

THE killer clams of Lizard Island were one thing – so big you didn't want to get too close. But the big Tasmanian oysters were something else again – so good you wanted to get very close, so good that the chief mate ordered another dozen for dessert.

You don't really want to put your foot down when you snorkel over the bed of giant clams at Lizard Island, off the far north Queensland coast.

As long as a metre, each clam's shells gape slightly open like two wavy but very solid lips. The tubular mouth lurks within.

"Actually, you don't have to worry too much about getting caught in one," marine biologist Len Zell told me. "They would have to expel all the water they have inside before they could close. Still, it's a good idea not to get too close."

As for the oysters, having them as an entree wasn't close enough for Orion's chief mate, Steffen Friedrich. So he ordered another dozen for dessert. What was good enough for the chief mate was good enough for me.

Of course you could fly to those tropical dots in Torres Strait, between Australia and

Fancy a first-class exploration option? Why not opt for the five-star comforts of the Orion as it cruises northern waters, writes **Mike Grenby**

Papua New Guinea: Coconut Island, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday Islands. Planes also land on Lizard Island, and on the tip of Cape York.

But there's a special feeling when you come ashore directly from the sea, as the original explorers did – even if you are skimming the waves in a Zodiac runabout launched from a boutique luxury cruise ship.

"We promise our guests something unique, a voyage to places where you will feel more of an explorer than a tourist," says Sarina Bratton, founder and managing director of Orion Expedition Cruises.

Indeed, exploring in a first-class sort of way goes down very smoothly. After an hour of snorkelling at Lizard's Watsons Beach, I joined several other passengers for sunset drinks on the sand before returning to the ship. Totally civilised.

The Orion started its inaugural season around Australia and Antarctica in April this year. Carrying 100 passengers, it has

the kind of luxury either you can afford (like the chap on board who was shooting 20 of his friends a week's cruise to celebrate his birthday) or dream about should you win the lottery.

Fares range from \$650 to \$1000 per person per night, depending on the cabin and the route.

So what's it like to travel in such luxury? In two words, very nice – even if you aren't quite in the market for the \$171,500 strand of 28 Paspaley pearls in the ship's boutique.

It's like being in a five-star floating hotel, with elegant decor and quality furnishings. The food is excellent, whether you are ordering from 24-hour room service or choosing the gourmet four-course menu for dinner designed by Serge Dansereau, Sydney's Bathurst Pavilion and formerly Regent Four Seasons executive chef.

The ship – seven decks, 4000 tonnes, 103 metres long, capable of travelling at 15 knots – was built in Germany 18 months ago. The ship's relatively small size

means the crew take on several roles. Cruise director Shirley McGrath, for example, drew on her training as an opera singer to provide entertainment.

Brisbane-based John Foley came on board in his role as a Great Barrier Reef pilot but also gave a running commentary and several lectures.

Everything is very compact. I measure the walk around Deck Six at 180 metres. Only a couple of walkers surface on this trip.

The ship has been provisioned in Cairns, so everything is fresh.

Breakfast starts at 8am in the Galaxy Lounge, continental style with designer coffee, cereal, fruit and sweet rolls. Then it's on to the main attraction at the Delphinus Outdoor Cafe, aft on Deck Four – a buffet plus designer omelette station. Or you can order a la carte in the air-conditioned Constellation Restaurant one deck down.

We head for Creach Reef, in the middle of the ocean. "Sometimes there is a sand island where we can land the Zodiacs,

but today the sand has been washed away so you will make a wet landing – snorkelling off the side of the Zodiacs," says Peter Skog, the ship's master.

Many passengers are disappointed to find the stop at Dars Island, Papua New Guinea, is simply to document that the cruise went out of Australian waters so it could gain duty-free status.

No one is allowed ashore; the only souvenir of PNG is an "in-out" entry in our passports.

When we arrive on Thursday Island, administrative centre of Torres Strait's 18 inhabited islands, I visit the Gab Thui Cultural Centre, with its small but interesting collection of historical artefacts.

In the afternoon I learn my "He visited Cape York, the northernmost point on the Australian mainland" certificate. I climb the little hill above the beach to see the stone cairn, then head down to the beach to pose by the official sign.

It's too rough when we get to Cooktown so we opt not to go ashore, which means we get into Port Douglas a bit early. There, most passengers return to the ship for the final dinner – with memories of scallops, kingfish, lamb, beef... all delicious. Or pasta or practically anything else, if something on the chef's menu doesn't interest you.

The next and final day we are back in Cairns – clearing customs and immigration, saying goodbye to new friends, adjusting to the shock of the real world and having to plan meals and other daily activities once again. Such is the travelling life.

Getting there

DAILY rates for an Orion cruise range from \$650 per day per person (twin share) for a stateroom on Deck Three for the seven-to-11-day Top End and Kimberley cruises, to \$1680 per day per person for an owner's suite with balcony and separate living room on Deck Five for the 15 to 20-day Antarctica and Southern Ocean cruises.

The fare covers cruise transportation, all meals on board (including 24-hour room service) and most non-alcoholic beverages. Zodiac and tender transfers, entertainment and education programs, use of ship CDs/DVDs, and government taxes and fees. More information from www.orioncruises.com.au Tel: 1300 361 012

